To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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THE CHURCH MOVES THE COMMUNITY

By Eugene Smathers*

The opportunity to share with you in this Farm and Home Week program is deeply appreciated. I am especially glad to commend those churches and their pastors for their outstanding achievements in community outreach for which they have just received awards. It is altogether fitting that the church be given recognition in the program of this Farm and Home Week, for the church has a significant contribution to make both to the rural family and to the rural community and, in turn, the church needs the support of good families on good farms.

Last night we heard Mrs. Raymond Sayre tell us that "freedom is the issue," and freedom begins in the home and local community with a sense of personal responsibility. The church has a vital, yes, essential role in the development of wholesome, dynamic community living. Increasingly the church as a local voluntary organization assumes importance as the motivating and integrating center of neighborhood life. With the consolidation of public schools and the movement of other service agencies to larger centers in many instances the church alone remains. Unless it motivates and guides in the effort to build a better and finer life no other agency or organization will.

I have been asked to tell the story of the effort of one small church to move and develop its community. This church is located in the small open-country community of Big Lick, on the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee. It is a community of about fifty families and in the past has known all the disadvantages and handicaps of an isolated and economically-handicapped region. In the early thirties, during the heart of the depression years, it was estimated that the average cash income per family was less than $100 per year.

SOME BASIC CONVICTIONS

Before proceeding to tell the story of the church's effort to minister to the needs of Big Lick, I would like to give you some of the basic convictions which have come out of this effort to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a practical day-by-day way to bear upon the whole of life in this small place.

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* Address delivered at the 4th Annual Church and Community Conference, Mississippi State College, on April 23, 1952, of Farm and Home Week. Mr. Smathers is pastor of the Big Lick Presbyterian Church, Tennessee.

First is the conviction that all life is one, that there can be no separation of life into sacred and secular, spiritual and material. God, who revealed himself and his will in Jesus Christ, is sovereign of all life. Life is a unity. The righteous and loving purposes of God have to do with the whole. The redemption offered in Christ is a total redemption. Souls cannot be saved apart from the other aspects of life -- soil, society, and souls belong together. Our task as Christians is to strive to bring all men and all areas of life into subjection to Christ. If Christianity is the truth about God, who is ultimate reality, it is also the truth about the whole of life.

This conviction has definite implications for the program of the church and for each individual Christian. One of the fundamental tasks of the church is to create wholeness out of the broken fragments of life, to bring unity where there is disunity, integration where there is disintegration. All the needs of all the people within reach of its ministry are within the bounds of its concern.

It is not enough to build a church as an institution, serving the interests of its own members alone. It is not enough to have services on Sunday. Rather it should be a center of service in the name and spirit of its Lord. As the body of Christ it needs to be a nucleus of power, the serving-center of the whole community. This it cannot be through a professional ministry alone. The lay members must have a sense of Christian vocation, responding to the call of Christ to serve the cause of his kingdom through their daily occupations and relationships as homemakers, as teachers, as farmers, as professional people, as politicians, as craftsmen, and on down the list of essential occupations.

A community becomes Christian not so much because of what happens on Sunday but because what happens on Sunday causes much more to happen through the week in homes, on the farm, in business and political relationships, in the classroom, and in the whole range of community life.

As the church faces its task in the world, it needs to act upon the two principles given classic statement by the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." First is the principle of nonconformity, the recognition that those who comprise the true church are a minority, a "peculiar people," a redeemed and redeeming remnant, a new humanity, and that the task of the church is to be the church, to strengthen the faith and discipleship of its members through worship and education, to win new members through evangelism, and to become a fellowship worthy of the body of Christ. This principle is generally recognized by church leaders; this is not so true regarding the second. This is the principle of cooperation and transformation -- cooperation with all men of good will in the effort to better the common life and the transformation of the life of its community and world through its own transformed life.

The early church acted upon these two principles. It combined participation in the life of the world with a very large measure of spiritual detachment from the world. The task of the church is not negation but fulfilment. It is not to be a cloistered body; its task is more dynamic and difficult: it is to steadfastly remain in the world, yet to strive to establish a standard and a scale of values that is not "of it." "The community of God is not a separate growth from this world's ways but intertwined with it, peculiar, but conjoined, cleansed and cleansing by its discipline in the dust." God works through other than ecclesiastical channels for the redemption of man and for the building of Christian community. Recognizing this, the church will work with its allies,

those other agencies and organizations in the community, for the common welfare.

According to Christian revelation love is the law of life. Jesus said that the true human life is grounded upon two eternal principles: love of God and love of neighbor. "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Paul said, "Love is the fulfilling of the law." Love is the law of life, and love can be realized and practiced only in a community of life. Man cannot realize God's intention for him by himself; he can be man only in community in a responsible and loving relationship to his fellowmen.

Out of this truth has come the conviction that the inclusive task of the rural church is the transformation, through the power of the Gospel, of a collection of separate individuals and families and their institutions, interrelated and interdependent by necessity, into a community of persons and families consciously and voluntarily united and working together for their mutual welfare and for the welfare of all mankind.

This purpose has been given beautiful expression in Ephesians 4:16 ((Moffatt's translation), "He, Christ, is the head, and under him, as the entire body is welded together and compacted by every joint with which it is supplied, the due activity of each part enables the body to grow and build itself up in love." The "sociological," the natural community is to become a "Christian community," a group of people sharing a common loyalty to Christ and seeking to work out the implications of that loyalty in every phase of life. Sometimes I have stated this purpose of the church in the following way: the church ought to be to its community what a good farm home is to the family. This simple comparison has many aspects, but one I would like to mention here is that the good home is concerned with all the needs of all its members.

IMPLEMENTATION OF CONVICTIONS

So much then for some of the basic convictions. Now let us see how they have been implemented in Big Lick. The effort of this church to develop its community began in 1917 with the coming of a woman community worker, Mrs. Carrie Murphy, who gave seventeen years of wise and devoted service. With her leadership the people built a new school building which, for many years, was to serve not only as a school but also as the church and community center. She organized the community to work for better roads, for improved schools, and for a better church program. The women were organized into a "Ladies' Aid Society," the oldest continuing organization in the community, with the purpose of being a mutual aid society and a means of teaching gardening, food preservation, child care, etc. As there was no public high school, Mrs. Murphy encouraged a good many young people to go away to school. The church was organized in 1921 and until 1934 was served by an absentee pastor. During these years the foundation was laid for the development which has taken place in later years.

A moment ago we said that the church must be concerned with all the needs of all the people, that no real human need is beyond its concern. The church should help meet any real need not being met adequately by some other agency, but it should never duplicate the work of those agencies designed to help solve certain problems or to achieve specific goals in community development.

There were many needs in Big Lick. And with the coming of the first resident pastor the people wanted to do something to meet the need for a church building. They were dissatisfied with the use of the school building and wanted a worshipful and functional church plant. But how? There was no surplus money

in the community. In the providence of God this need was soon met. Money was contributed by an interested friend, and the congregation and community contributed labor and materials. We discovered that there are other resources than money and that in togetherness, even of poor people, there is strength. This attractive building, constructed by the loving hands of plain country folk, became not only a house of worship -- this is vitally important, for worship is the core of Christian community -- not only a house of worship which stands as a silent symbol of God's presence in the midst of community life but it also provided facilities for an enlarged church and community program, including recreation.

At the time the church was built, a small tract of land was purchased for a church farm. Later this was developed, partially through the labor contributions of members who had no money to give. This farm now serves as a means for supplementing the minister's income, affords him a way of greater identification with his people, and makes possible some humble demonstration in good land use and in improved farming practices which, in several instances, have been adopted by the neighbors.

In response to a somewhat tragic need for better health and for more adequate medical care and with an excellent precedent for making an effort to meet this need in that Christ spent much of his time healing sick bodies and minds, a health program was inaugurated. A House of Health was constructed by the labor of the people, again with financial assistance from outside. The building serves both as a residence for a nurse and a center for the health program. The work of the nurse centers largely in the homes, with occasional emergency care at the center. Health education is emphasized, and school health examinations are followed up with corrective measures. Tonsil and dental clinics are held as needed.

More recently, in cooperation with a group of Christian doctors in our nearest town, a sort of prepayment medical care program has been put into operation with two medical clinics at the local center each month. In the interval between clinics the members can call at the doctors' offices for examination and treatment, with some small reduction in cost. The contribution which this minimum health program has made to the community is well expressed in the words of one woman, "I don't see how we got along before."

Another area of need for which the church felt it must have a concern has been that of economic development, for improvement here was essential to the solution of many of the other problems which beset the community. Various efforts in this direction were made. One was the preaching and teaching of soil conservation as a fundamental phase of Christian stewardship. Stewardship implies participation in action programs which have as their purpose the improvement of soil resources, such as the AAA (now PMA), the soil conservation district, etc. As the result of this kind of teaching the farmers in Big Lick were the first to make almost one hundred per cent use of the resources offered through AAA in the early years of this program.

A "farmers" school was tried and "experts," at a lot of effort, told us how to improve our farming practices, but we did nothing about these. Greater success came when we discovered the "study-for-action" movement which had been so effective in Nova Scotia among people whose problems were much like our own. Groups of neighbors met in their own homes or at the church, selected their own leaders and subjects, and together sought for workable solutions to actual and common needs. Many possibilities were explored; the "experts" were asked to come to advise about specific problems. This time their advice was more often

heeded as it came in response to a felt need. Here is what the county agent wrote me about these study clubs:

"Six months of study in a special agricultural school away from home could not have done the things for many of the farmers in Big Lick which they have done themselves in a year of study clubs. They now come to my office seeking information to use in making farm problem decisions and community decisions like no other community.

"Through study clubs Big Lick families are learning by searching out information on their problems from the best sources. They send out committees to study and report on problems, then action is taken by the group. This is truly democracy at work.... Big Lick is setting a pattern for surrounding communities...."

Not only did these study clubs result in the development of individuals and of leadership, in the improvement of farming practices on individual farms, but probably the most significant result was the organization of a Farmers Association, a small cooperative, for the ownership and operation of certain heavy equipment which the farmers could not possibly own individually. Realizing that we live in an age of mechanization in agriculture, the cooperative ownership of expensive machinery is one important way by which the small farmer can have the use of the same equipment as the big farmer. Our association has proved that it can be done. But as a minister the cooperative appeals to me not primarily because it offers small farmers a better income, rather it seems to me to be a concrete way of putting love in action in the face of present realities. Cooperation and togetherness can do something for men's spirits as well as for their pocketbooks.

In response to a need current in many small rural communities during the latter years of the depression, when youth were caught without educational or economic opportunity, and with the conviction that security on the land provides one of the best foundations for a Christian home, the church inaugurated a church homestead project, perhaps the most significant of its efforts for community development. This project, administered by officers of the church, purchases farms or undeveloped tracts of land and resells them to young families on a long-term contract. At the close of World War II we were able to help each service man, who wanted to come home and farm and who did not have a farm, to secure land. As payments are made on present homesteads, the fund accumulates for the purchase of additional farms. The interest, which is at a very low rate, is used to cover operating costs and for general community improvement. Beyond its contribution to individual families, which now include almost half of the total families in the community, this project has helped to bring stability to the community and has made it possible to keep some of our better youth at home.

COOPERATION WITH OTHER AGENCIES

Earlier I said that it was my conviction that the church must work with its allies in the community, the other agencies working for community development, and that in many situations the church must act as the interpreter and agent of integration in its local neighborhood, if the people are to secure the benefits and use the resources which these agencies offer. Through the years the church in Big Lick has sought to cooperate with its allies, interpreting their services to the people, providing a place for meetings, and encouraging participation in their programs. This cooperation has borne much fruit.

We have worked closely with the Agricultural Extension Service and its

farm and home agents and with the 4-H clubs which it sponsors. We have had the cooperation of TVA in various community efforts: community organization and area demonstration in soil conservation. TVA, Division of Forestry, State Forestry Department, and Extension Service worked with us in the development of a program of farm woodland development. In connection with this program a small community forest has been established by the church homestead project, assuring some timber for local use down through the years. A community sawmill and planer are operated by the Farmers Association. Several farmers are participating in the tree farm program.

The church has cooperated with the public school and PTA in the improvement of grounds and recreational facilities, and in the operation of a hot lunch program. There is hardly an agency or organization working in our county or region and concerned with some aspect of rural community development with which the church has not cooperated.

But not all of the efforts of the church have been centered in the local community. It has recognized that Big Lick is a small part of the county, the region, and the world, and that there must be a concern for those wider-than-community relationships. Realizing that "loyalty to the community is morally tolerable only if it includes values wider than those of the community", there has been a determined effort to relate the people of this small community to the larger world.

Local leadership has been developed and has spread over into county affairs until today this small community supplies leadership in the various agricultural and welfare activities of the county far out of proportion to its population. Big Lick people have places of leadership in the Farm Bureau, Cumberland County Farmers Cooperative, Production Marketing Administration, veterans' training, county fair, hospital board, Livestock Producers Association, county school bus system, and in many other agencies and organizations interested in various phases of county development. In fact this spilling over of leadership into county affairs constitutes one of the community's greatest problems just now: our people have so many responsibilities outside the community that they do not have the time they once had to tackle local projects. But our loss is the county's gain!

Efforts have been made to develop world-wide understanding and sympathies. Every opportunity to bring visitors from other races, nations, and cultural backgrounds has been welcomed. During two summers work camps of college students were held. These were interracial and the campers shared in the total life of church and community, demonstrating a rare example of Christian fellowship. Visual aids, depicting the life of people in other parts of the world, were used. A D.P. family was brought from Hungary, their home was furnished, and a real attempt was made to make this fine family feel at home in our midst. Even though this family did not remain with us but six months, the experience of helping these folk who had seen war's worst meant much to the people of Big Lick. We have participated in numerous relief programs. And there has been study and discussion of broader-than-community issues.

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

In these and other ways the church in Big Lick has sought to develop Christian community, and for almost twenty years now I have had the burden and the joy of sharing in these endeavors. As the scene of these labors is so small, there are many who would say that I have wasted the best years of my life by submerging myself in this little place. Living as we do in a dynamic society where

change comes without warning, the outward accomplishments of the years could be wiped out in the twinkling of an eye. Yet we need to remember the importance of little things. Last night Mrs. Sayre reminded us of the importance of one vote. Today I would remind you of the importance of the smallest rural community. Dr. Warren H. Wilson, one of the pioneers in the development of the rural church movement in America and who had a great influence upon the direction of my life, once told of an experience in his college days which had a profound influence upon his life. The professor of biology sent him to study the life in a barnyard pond. There he discovered the greatness and significance of what seems to be very small.

So often we, especially in our youth or in times of crisis like today, want to do big things for the kingdom of God, forgetting that the "big" things are but the composite of a multitude of "little" things faithfully and skillfully done. "The more a man belongs to his own times and community, the more will he belong to all times and all countries." Our best contribution, as rural people, to the building of a Christian world is to do what we can toward the building of Christian community in the local place where we live and labor. And even though it be a small place, it can have value for the wider world.

Dr. J. H. Oldham has said that the essential stuff of life is personal relations and that an indispensable task of the church is to restore substance and depth to life by developing opportunities for the exercise of mutual obligations and responsibilities of persons-in-community. The very fact that Big Lick is a small place has enabled me to enter creatively and intensely into this fabric of personal relations and thereby contribute to the substance of life which might not have been possible in a larger and more glamorous place. And the values which are enduring are the things which happen to persons.

I am convinced that something important happens to persons when any group of people, in a common loyalty to Jesus Christ, seek to apply the Gospel to the whole of their lives and relationships. Thus the outward achievements are but the by-product of a more fundamental task, and though these should disappear through social change or catastrophe, the process of seeking to build a Christian community would be most worthwhile. For what happens to us as we seek to bring the will of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, to bear upon the whole of our lives cannot be destroyed. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you."

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